

# SRI LANKA: WAR ON CIVILIANS

In 2009, in a tiny patch of land in the north-east of Sri Lanka, 100,000s of Tamil civilians were trapped under fire.

This exhibition uses photographs taken by Tamils inside the war zone to show what it was like to be there. This is just a snapshot of one point in decades of violence – not the whole story of the conflict.

## Note on photographers

The photographers who took these images risked their lives just moving around in the open with a camera. Most cannot be credited, either for their own safety or because their identity and fate remains unknown. We thank them collectively for recording these events.

Many images are low-resolution because they were reduced in size to send them out of the war zone on very limited bandwidth. This is a small selection from thousands of images and videos that have survived – many of which are so graphic they could not be exhibited in public.

## About the photographer: Amarathaas

Amarathaas is a Tamil visual artist who taught photo journalism and exhibited in Sri Lanka before he was caught up in the war in 2009. As he fled with the people from village to village, he was in a unique position to record their suffering and his own.

Amarathaas's eldest brother was first wounded in a shell attack by the Sri Lankan Army in April 2009 and then killed in another attack in May. His brother's son was also killed and his two daughters forcibly recruited by the LTTE – one remains missing. In May 2009, Amarathaas himself was injured in his leg and suffers to this day as a result despite three operations in Switzerland where he now lives as a refugee.

## About the International Truth and Justice Project

The ITJP is an NGO based in South Africa which works on Sri Lanka and collects and preserves testimony from war and torture survivors for the purpose of future accountability. The ITJP has the largest archive of evidence regarding war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Sri Lanka in 2009 and in the aftermath of the war. In 2017, the ITJP filed a lawsuit under universal jurisdiction against the General in command of the military operation in the north of Sri Lanka in 2009.

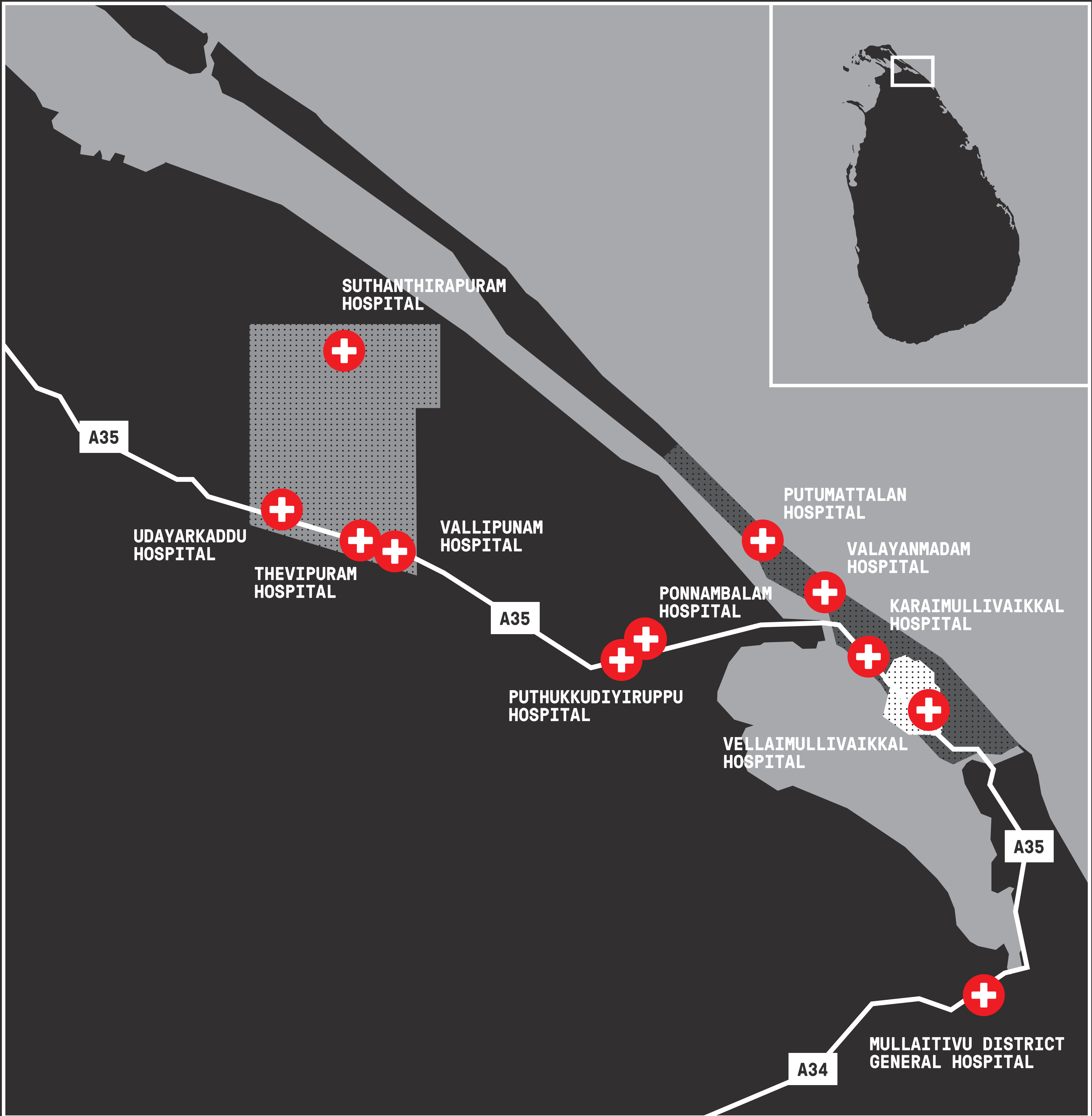
## Design by TEMPLO

TEMPLO is a branding and digital agency, which specialises on creativity for change. Their current clients include the United Nations, London School of Economics and Amnesty International and they continue to raise awareness of Sri Lankan human rights abuses through campaigns such as #StopTorture and #ArrestTheGeneral.

TEMPLO's work has been featured in Wired Magazine, Design Museum's 2018 'Hope to Nope' exhibition and on Channel 4 News.

## BACKGROUND

The three-decade long war in Sri Lanka was between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who fought for a separate state for Tamils, and the Sri Lankan military. A series of United Nations reports after 2009 have collected testimony and analysed the violations of international humanitarian law by all parties, especially in the final five months of the war shown here. However, nobody has yet been held accountable for the immense human suffering inflicted on civilians.



NO FIRE ZONE 1  
ANNOUNCED ON 21 JAN 2009

NO FIRE ZONE 2  
ANNOUNCED ON 12 FEB 2009

NO FIRE ZONE 2  
ANNOUNCED ON 8 MAY 2009

INTERNATIONAL  
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AND JUSTICE  
PROJECT

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# 1. FLEEING

As the shells started to fall in 2008, families packed up their belongings, believing it was a temporary move and they would soon be home again. They had no idea the entire area would eventually be overrun by the Sri Lankan military.

“...each time they moved, the Internally Displaced Persons loaded tractors, bicycles or carts with all their belongings, taking their domestic animals if they had them. Increasingly they had to abandon belongings, or in extreme cases, even relatives.”

UN PANEL OF EXPERTS, 2011, PARAGRAPH 72



Amarathaas  
Valayanmadam, February 2009



Amarathaas  
Putumattalan, February 2009

## DISPLACEMENT

Civilians were used to being displaced by fighting but in 2009 hundreds of thousands of Tamils were on the move every few weeks. They shed their belongings as they ran for safety, short of food and medicine, finally living in the open in the scorching heat on the beach.

In 2009 the Government of Sri Lanka unilaterally announced three successive ‘No Fire Zones’ but civilians in all of them came under attack

“We spent most of this time under cover, in the trenches that myself, my brother and father had dug. These were very rudimentary. The shelling was intense and incessant, and getting out of the trench, to cook or get water was highly dangerous...There were no toilet facilities and people were forced to relieve themselves in public.”

WITNESS 233, POST-WAR TORTURE SURVIVOR IN THE UK

## SHELTER

Makeshift bunkers and flimsy tents offered little protection from the shelling and bombing. Women even cut up their precious wedding saris to make sandbags.

As they neared the sea it became harder to dig bunkers in the wet sand or find any space to live because so many thousands of people were crammed into the tiny area.

“My father and I started to dig a bunker on the edge of the lagoon at Mullivaikkal. It was watery and muddy. While digging, we discovered a body and worms started to come out of it. We put a canvas on top of that area because there was no other place to stay and we sheltered there for about three days.”

WITNESS 288, POST-WAR TORTURE SURVIVOR IN THE UK

## HUNGER

The Government was responsible for sending food and medicine to civilians in the war zone. It deliberately underestimated the population numbers in the area.

Officials estimated at least 3,000 metric tonnes of food were needed monthly but in 2009 a fraction of that was sent. People were forced to eat kanji – watery rice soup – which they queued to receive once a day. Baby milk formula was more valuable than gold as mothers became too malnourished to breastfeed.

“There was an attack on the food distribution point at Pokkanai in April. People were in the queue, especially children who were receiving milk powder. It was an attack from the air and from artillery. A lot of people were killed and injured. I saw bodies lying on the street; nobody was able to bury them because of the continuous shelling and bombing.”

WITNESS 295, POST-WAR TORTURE SURVIVOR IN THE UK





# 2. ATTACKED

The Sri Lankan Government said it had a policy of “zero civilian casualties”. The reality was quite different. A United Nations Investigation later said attacks on civilians were not isolated incidents but part of a pattern and in some cases civilians may have been deliberately targeted. From February 2009, hundreds of thousands of civilians were crammed into a No Fire Zone just 14 square kilometres in size.

“It is estimated that there were between 300,000 and 330,000 civilians in that small area. The Sri Lankan Army assault employed aerial bombardment, long-rang artillery, howitzers and multi-barrelled rocket launcher as well as small mortars, rocket propelled grenade and small arms fire, some of it from a close range.”

UN PANEL OF EXPERTS, 2011, PARAGRAPH 100



## ATTACK ON UN CONVOY 11



## NO FIRE ZONES



## MULTI-BARRELLED ROCKET LAUNCHERS

The United Nations reported that heavy artillery and indirect fire weapons such as multi-barrelled rocket launchers were systematically fired by the Sri Lankan Army at densely populated civilian areas.

“My niece’s head was blown off by a bomb. She was 18 years old and I saw it with my own eyes. She was staying with us, and on that day there were multi-barrelled rocket launcher attacks and 4 other civilians were killed.”

MALE INTERVIEWEE

## CLUSTER MUNITIONS

Sri Lanka says it never used cluster munitions and claims that today there are no victims of this weapon in the country. However multiple witnesses described clusters being used against densely populated civilian areas.

“I daily saw cluster munitions...The cluster bombs exploded about 30 feet above the ground. When it exploded 12, 16 or 32 smaller bomblets hit the ground and then exploded.”

WITNESS 280, A SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK

## DRONES

The attacking Sri Lankan forces had access to drone footage and surveillance aircrafts which enabled them to see where civilian encampments were. Nevertheless these areas were repeatedly attacked.

“Drones were often used... You could only hear them, not see them unless the sky was very clear. They were very high. When we saw them, we knew an attack was coming and we would hide in bunkers.”

WITNESS 265, A SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK



Amarathasa  
Valayanmadam, February 2009



Amarathasa  
Valayanmadam, March 2009



# 3 . HOSPITALS

Every hospital and makeshift clinic in the war zone was repeatedly attacked by the Sri Lankan Army in 2009. Some are listed here.

Several medical staff were killed or injured; essential drugs like antibiotics and anaesthesia ran very short. Conditions were appalling but thousands of patients were treated in makeshift clinics by a handful of surgeons who saved countless lives, assisted by medics and volunteers.

## PUTUMATTALAN HOSPITAL



The UN: “received information on multiple incidents of shelling of Putumattalan hospital and the adjacent United Nations hub between 9 February and 20 April 2009.”

UN REPORT 2015, PARAGRAPH 843



“Intense fighting continued in the No Fire Zone, including around Putumattalan hospital, which the ICRC described as nothing short of catastrophic”.

UN REPORT 2015, PARAGRAPH 848

## MULLIVAICKAL HOSPITALS



“At least eight separate impact craters were identified on the roofs of four hospital buildings in the compound of Mullivaikkal hospital. At least two mortar impact craters were identified in the adjacent compound of the primary healthcare facility.”

UN REPORT 2015, PARAGRAPH 871



## VALLIPUNAM HOSPITAL



The UN examined satellite imagery of Vallipunam hospital that showed “two impact craters in the hospital compound and four rooftop impacts on three different buildings, partial destruction of one building and total destruction of another eight buildings, that all occurred between 21 January and 18 February 2009. Over 50 additional artillery impact sites can be seen within a one-kilometre radius of the hospital...”

UN REPORT 2015, PARAGRAPH 808

## PTK HOSPITAL



“Satellite imagery indicates that between 21 January and 5 February 2009, at least 10 primary buildings and 20 auxiliary buildings of PTK hospital were either severely damaged or destroyed. At least 30 rooftop impact craters consistent with artillery fire were identified across the hospital complex.”

UN REPORT 2015, PARAGRAPH 830

## VALAYANMADAM HOSPITAL



“On 21-22 April 2009, the area in and around Valayanmadam was repeatedly shelled, including the church compound and the medical facilities.”

UN REPORT 2015, PARAGRAPH 855

## ICRC EVACUATION



“In total 16 ICRC ships came to the conflict zone in the final months... the wounded had to be ferried on small boats as the ship was not allowed to come closer than a kilometre offshore. The wounded were lined up on the beach but several times came under fire.”

UN PANEL OF EXPERTS REPORT, PARAGRAPHS 106-7



# 4 . FINAL DAYS

By May 2009, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were packed into a No Fire Zone of less than two square kilometres territory. Conditions were desperate as the Sri Lankan army continued to shell the area.

“Multiple witnesses described scenes of devastation, with hundreds of bodies of people killed by shelling scattered across areas within the No Fire Zones. Entire families had been killed as bombs landed in bunkers they were sheltering in.”

UN PANEL OF EXPERTS, 2011, PARAGRAPH 100



Amarathaas  
April 2009, Mullivaikkal



Amarathaas  
Putumattalan, February 2009

## BEFORE SURRENDER

“It was complete chaos; it cannot be described in words. Crying and screaming parents carried their wounded children here and there in panic. The children were severely wounded, some with half-severed limbs hanging from their bodies... I saw a small girl around 8 years old carrying a baby; she didn’t recognise her little sister was already dead. Her mother was lying wounded. We saw her and managed to call her over to sit in our bunker.”

WITNESS 289, AFTER 12 MAY 2009 IN MULIVAICKAL



## “OUR LAND WAS TURNED INTO A GRAVEYARD”

“I saw a group of girls struck by a bomb and they burned alive. They were put on an open tractor and the sun was burning on their burn wounds all over their bodies. I saw them there and heard them screaming but nobody could do anything, I could only bear witness to their terrible suffering while they were calling out for help.”

WITNESS 289, AFTER 12 MAY 2009 IN MULLIVAICKAL



## CROSSING THE LAGOON

“I was only 13 years old when the war ended and I don’t remember exactly when, but at the end we crossed the Nanthikadal lagoon. My father carried my younger sister on his shoulders, the water came to my chin and sometimes higher, so I had to jump up holding on to my father’s shoulders.”

WITNESS 243, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK

“I had to throw away my crutches to cross the lagoon, as the roads were not safe. The water came up to my neck; my children were on my shoulders, my wife holding onto one arm and a bag of documents in the other.”

WITNESS 233, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK

## ESCAPING TO THE BRIDGE

“We crossed over the bridge to the army side. I saw a lot of dead bodies on the bridge and in the water. The bodies were of old and young men and women, children and babies. The water was not the normal colour of water - where the bodies were the water was red. I saw children screaming for their parents as they could not find them.”

WITNESS 242, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK

“The smell was terrible. There was blood and body parts all over the road. I had to step over many corpses.”

WITNESS 129, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK

## LEAVING LOVED ONES BEHIND

“An old woman was crying. She was standing among the dead bodies and damaged tents and asking for help to bury her dead husband. At the time the Sri Lankan Army was approaching and we couldn’t help her but she refused to come and she was crying and saying ‘I already lost my children in the war - they were in the LTTE’ - but we couldn’t help her. I can’t even forget about it now.”

MALE INTERVIEWEE

“My grandfather was hit by a shell and fell. The army ordered us to move on and we had to leave him behind.”

WITNESS 298, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR DETENTION, NOW IN THE UK



# 5 . AFTERMATH

By the last day of the war, 18 May 2009, more than 280,000 people had surrendered to the Sri Lankan Army.

Suspected Tamil former combatants were not treated as prisoners of war. Instead, they were detained for years, and many were humiliated, tortured and sexually violated and forced to pay ransom to escape the country.

Hundreds of those who surrendered disappeared without trace - even though they were witnessed in army custody. Their families have spent years demanding their return in vain.



## BETRAYAL

“The informers would be brought in with their faces covered so that you could only see their eyes and nose and mouth through a slit... They would stand with a soldier from the army and when they were in front of another LTTE cadre they would nod their heads to identify them. These people are called Thalayaddi in Tamil (nodders) because they nod their heads when they recognise someone.”

**WITNESS 266, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK**

## EXECUTION

“The last phase of the war was horrible. On 16 May 2009, my family and I first tried to cross to the army-controlled area in the morning. That day alone, I witnessed a hundred civilians being directly shot at by the Army and dying in front of my eyes while trying to cross to the army-controlled area. We felt terrified and hopeless.”

**WITNESS 292, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR DETENTION, NOW IN THE UK**

## DETENTION

“We were paraded by the army to the Sinhalese people to show them they had crushed us. Large crowds would gather and the crowd would shout and say, ‘Why are they being taken away for detention, why aren't you killing them, let them off the buses, we will kill them’. The soldiers were laughing and said, ‘See this is what we would like to do’. We looked dirty and unkempt like animals. We looked defeated and they looked like the conquering victorious army.”

**WITNESS 254, LTTE CADRE BEING TRANSPORTED TO DETENTION BY BUS. NOW IN THE UK**

## TODAY

“What I can never erase from my mind are the scenes of the children, the elderly and civilians dying. In one family everyone died except a child of about 18 months and his father. Both were wounded in the head and the boy was so hungry. The blood was running from his head. He had no idea what was going on around him and I think he was just sucking his thumb because he was so hungry.”

**WITNESS 289, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, IN SWITZERLAND**

## DISAPPEARANCE

“I haven't seen my mother since 2008. I don't know if my mother or father are alive or dead. I have not heard any rumors about what happened to them. When I was in Sri Lanka, I asked people about my parents but I did not get any news or information about them. I was scared to ask about my father because he was in the LTTE.”

**WITNESS 290, SURVIVOR OF POST-WAR TORTURE, NOW IN THE UK**

“I think about what happened every day. My hands shake permanently. I sleep poorly from the extreme stress of years of anxiety and fear when I did not know what would happen the next moment... I am unable to come out of my experiences and what I saw during the war and during detention. My children ask me every day when can we go back to Sri Lanka.”

**FEMALE INTERVIEWEE**